

Religion as play

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Article

Religion as Play: Pentecostalism as a Theological Type

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Abstract: This article suggests that Pentecostalism constitutes a genuine type of religion we can label as play. In order to identify the particular elements of this type, the article makes use of Erving Goffman's frame analysis to organize Pentecostal theological activity. This methodological starting point is followed by an overview of existing interpretations of Pentecostalism as a form of play. The main portion of this essay then constructs from an analysis of everyday experiences visible in Pentecostalism a primary framework of activities oriented around the transformative encounter with the Holy Spirit. The sequence of activity involves a primary and overlapping pattern of Pentecostal spirituality, experience, narrative, affections, practices, and embodiment. Demonstrating that play is not exclusive to Pentecostalism, but that Pentecostals manifest a particularly visible form, demands that greater attention is paid both to Pentecostalism as a religious tradition and to play as a theological model.

Keywords: Pentecostalism; play; theology; frame analysis; typology

Pentecostalism is frequently identified as one of the fastest growing religious movements of the twentieth century, and interest in Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity has grown dramatically over the last decades, but little agreement exists about the exact nature of what we label with the term "Pentecostal." The adolescence of Pentecostalism may offer helpful insights into the development of young religious movements, yet the question can be asked if the Pentecostal movement indeed possesses a distinctive religious character and how its theology relates to the established Christian traditions and to religion as a whole.¹ It is the argument of this essay that the religious identity of Pentecostalism is rooted in its particular character as a genuine theological type held together by an enigmatic theological method: the mode of play. The difficulty of identifying Pentecostalism stems from a lack of apprehending the particular activities that together comprise religion as play. In order to identify the particular elements of Pentecostalism as play, I make use of Erving Goffman's social theory of conceptual frames to organize Pentecostal religious activity. This methodological starting point is followed by a brief overview of existing proposals that relate Pentecostalism and play. The main portion of this essay then conducts a frame analysis of the core elements characteristic of Pentecostal theology. I conclude with a proposal outlining why play can function as a model for the study of Pentecostalism and how it can be used to organize Pentecostal theology going forward. The essay ends with a discussion of the potential impact of play on the study of religion.

1. Religion and Play: Identifying a Type

The notion of play is thoroughly embedded in psychology, sociology, education, art, literature, and even mathematics and the natural sciences (See [Pellegrini 2011](#)). Religious scholars have made use

¹ A typology of Pentecostal theology is offered by [Stephenson \(2013\)](#).

of the idea of play in observations of religious rituals and practices or to assess the religious nature of social activities (See [Droogers 2014](#); [Bellah 2011](#); [Baker 2007](#); [van Harskamp 2006](#)). Methodological considerations for studying play often assume the existence of play in such religious contexts, even if methods cannot be generalized and different environments can yield contrasting observations. However, comparatively little attention has been paid to Christianity as a context for play, and hardly any concern is given to an understanding of how Christian theology may unfold in the terms of play (See [Johnston 1983](#); [Schall 1976](#); [Moltmann 1972](#); [Miller 1970](#)). In the particular contexts of worldwide Pentecostalism, this essay assumes that the identity of this religious movement is situated in the theological activity and persuasion, or imagination, of its diverse contexts. It is therefore necessary to identify the signals that mark off these contexts as play and to organize the corresponding theological activities in order to arrive at a genuine starting point for subsequent observation.

A definition of play is notoriously difficult and conditioned by the dual tendencies of scholars to avoid play altogether or to apply criteria too restrictive to recognize behavior as play (See [Burgardt 2011](#)). Following Johan Huizinga's seminal study of the play-element in culture (1949), we can define play with caution in this essay as a primordial pattern of individual action and interaction, distinguished by its qualities of transformation and consummation as well as its unpredictable outcomes.² Celebrating the diversity of existing proposals, we can identify play by its free and voluntary activity observing different functions of rules, time, space, and equipment than ordinary life and banding participants together in a transformative and unpredictable fashion ([Huizinga 1949](#), pp. 8–27). Yet, we cannot simply apply existing theories and methods of the study of play directly to religion until we have first recognized the potential environment or set of behavioral categories in which religion as play might be found. The focus in the context of religion is placed on identifying what Huizinga termed the primordial or primary elements of play. I suggest that a useful methodology for this exercise is provided by sociologist Erving Goffman's notion of frame analysis.

The notion of frames, originally introduced by Gregory Bateson as a mental construct to describe “what is going on” in interactive situations, was applied to sociological theory by Goffman as a way to organize meanings and to guide and interpret everyday social activities ([Goffman 1974](#); [Bateson 1972](#)). Primary frameworks constitute the central elements of a particular social group, culture, and belief system, and as such they “vary in degree of organization” ([Goffman 1974](#), p. 21). Goffman highlights that we are typically unaware of such primary frameworks, yet it is possible to appraise social action by mapping and interpreting the actions, rules, movements, elements, and processes of the activity ([Goffman 1974](#), pp. 28–37). An initial appraisal of such activities can provide access to understanding the primary frameworks active in Pentecostalism, even if the individual activities are not deliberately intended or interpreted as play. Observations of Pentecostal theological activities and conventions have been subject to increasing study, leading to significant attempts at “scripting” the everyday theology of Pentecostal congregations ([Cartledge 2010](#)). Further attempts have been made to “rescript” this ordinary theology into a broader understanding of the beliefs and practices of Pentecostals ([Cartledge 2008a](#); [Martin 2006](#)). However, what is missing is a way to transcribe the literal activities in a way that reveals the primary frameworks of meaning operative in Pentecostalism and to do so in a manner that identifies the framework of frameworks as a genuine theological type. The hypothesis of this article is that this archetype of Pentecostal activity can be labeled as play.

Goffman applies the notion of primary frames immediately to playful actions and suggests that the complex behavior of play can be organized into a strip of activity ([Goffman 1974](#), pp. 40–47). His resulting presentation indicates that primary frames of play conceal their ordinary function, often exaggerating acts, following few patterns, frequently starting, stopping and mixing activities and roles, independent of external needs, yet inviting sociable playfulness. The key to primary frames of play are “the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary

² See also ([Henricks 2008](#)).

framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else" (Goffman 1974, pp. 43–44). In other words, while the scripting of ordinary Pentecostal theology may reveal the activities of praying, shouting, jumping, dancing, or prophesying among diverse Pentecostal groups (Albrecht 1999), these actions must be further interpreted in order to stand as expressions of play. Goffman describes the process of transcribing the transformation of these primary activities as "keying."

Keying is the essential act of interpreting what is going on in a certain activity and identifying its transformed meaning for the participants. Goffman emphasizes that the resulting analysis is based on actions that are literally occurring, whereas the keying of these actions reveals nonliteral activity (Goffman 1974, p. 47). There is, in principle, no literal activity we can call play—the identification of playful behavior always depends on the interpretation of literal performances we label more immediately as jumping, running, or kicking a ball. That a strip of activity is considered play is already the result of a keying of original activities which may by themselves not be seen as playful. Identifying Pentecostal theology as play thus depends on the interpretation of literal activities which project the framing of meaning that serves as a model for understanding and reinterpreting Pentecostalism as a whole (Goffman 1974, p. 52). The chief interest of this article is a keying of the non-literal activities in Pentecostal theology in order to reveal the set of conventions active in Pentecostalism that is otherwise concealed by the primary function of literal activities. In other words, the identification of Pentecostalism depends on a transformation of actual, untransformed activities into a rekeying of their core religious expression. The chief objective of this article is to interpret these theological activities as a genuine expression of religion labeled as play.

2. Pentecostalism as Play: Existing Proposals

The Dutch scholar Jean-Jacques Suurmond can be seen as the first to identify Pentecostalism with a form of play (See Suurmond 1994, 1992). He understands the world itself and the sociocultural domain as structures in which the religious and theological life is played out. Amidst these structures, "the essential contribution of Pentecostal spirituality lies in its playful character" (Suurmond 1994, p. 220) evident above all in the charismatic manifestations and practices of the movement. For Suurmond, play resides between order and chaos directed by the Word of God, providing the necessity and structure of play, and the Spirit of God, supplying the dynamism and chance (Suurmond 1994, p. 29; 1992, pp. 248–50). Play is carried out in tension between the Pentecostal identity and the confrontation of that identity with new and different contexts and environments. Pentecostalism is the play of Word and Spirit which "sets us free from our goal-oriented, play-corrupting attitude" (Suurmond 1992, p. 252) and "puts people in a position to surpass themselves to a degree that normally lies outside their reach" (Suurmond 1994, p. 180). Pentecostalism manifests this process in what is essentially a charismatic event. "Word" and "Spirit" arise as the primary frames which govern Pentecostal activity. Still, Suurmond does not offer a definition of play as a religious activity or an explanation of how Word and Spirit function in the keying of literal activities among Pentecostals. Neither is it evident what structures exactly exhibit play and how these differ from other theological activities and religious traditions.

The cultural anthropologist André Droogers has considered Pentecostalism more broadly as representative of religion at play, focusing primarily on the paradoxical character of the movement (Droogers 2014, 1999, 1996; See also Knibbe and Droogers 2011). Droogers views "Pentecostalism" as a social scientific construct that offers a universal framework for the study of religion by stressing the highly adaptive nature of the movement to sociocultural demands that identify Pentecostalism as a rather ambivalent form of religion (Droogers 2014, pp. 258–61). He proposes that the nature of Pentecostalism as play is evident in "the capacity to deal simultaneously and subjunctively with two or more ways of classifying reality" (Droogers 1996, p. 53). Pentecostalism represents a particularly forceful example of how religion (as play) allows the human being to engage the idea of the sacred as an alternative reality amidst the diverse and concrete cultural demands of a globalizing world.

Play becomes a form of methodological ludism in the character of religion that is evident primarily in Pentecostal ritual practices (Droogers 2012, pp. 105–40). Droogers' work is crucial for understanding the religious character of Pentecostals, especially for the consideration of rituals which have risen to a central focus in defining Pentecostalism. Yet, his observations do not offer a theological definition of play, and the idea of a methodological ludism, conceived as a general intellectual capacity to classify reality, stands in tension to his idea of play as primarily a form of religious practices. Droogers' conceptualization of play as creating and dissolving borders is akin to the use of frames (Droogers 2014, p. 125); nonetheless, it is play as such that is here seen as a primary frame, and the literal elements of play that transform ordinary activity have yet to be applied to theological activity and to Pentecostal theology.

In my own work, I have made further attempts at identifying Pentecostal theology as play by proposing that play marks a transitional activity within Pentecostalism that distinguishes Pentecostal theology in kind from established theological traditions (Vondey 2010). In the language of Goffman, play represents a primary framework for structuring and restructuring the global theological agenda by offering a "logic" that holds together Pentecostal theology (Vondey 2010, pp. 16–170). Yet, I conclude, even play itself is in crisis—its function as a primary frame is challenged by the formalization, routinization, and institutionalization of theological traditions (Vondey 2010, pp. 171–201). Classical Pentecostalism is in the process of going beyond itself by exhibiting its playfulness in the terms of a consistent emphasis on the renewal of its original structures. Thus, play serves as a metaphor which unites Pentecostal theology in its historical development. Even so, I was able to explain the elements of Pentecostal theology only in distinction from other traditions and not as a primary framework of meaning. While play is viewed as a method of living and interpreting the logic of reality by transforming and transcending its existing structures and demands towards the realm of alternative expectations, my earlier proposal does not detail the primary theological activities of Pentecostals or the process of transcribing the transformation of these activities into a primary framework of meaning.

The most recent interpretation comes from the Nigerian Pentecostal scholar Nimi Wariboko, who engages the preceding studies with an eye towards identifying play as a core principle of Pentecostalism (Wariboko 2012). Wariboko resists the idea of play as an end in itself and instead classifies play as pure means and unended action. Wariboko criticizes Suurmond for neglecting to identify play as the distinctive essence of Pentecostalism and appraises my own work as wishing to integrate play in the theological vocabulary but failing to engage "play as a proper image for human existence and for the divine-human relationship" (Wariboko 2012, p. 165). Instead, Wariboko suggests that play finds expression in Pentecostalism as pure self-presentation actualized in concrete actions of the community and in their participation in the transcendent (Wariboko 2012, pp. 169–70). Pentecostalism traces the socio-ontological contours that characterize play as a free and non-instrumentalized environment of unended potentiality (Wariboko 2012, p. 186). Yet, despite offering new conceptual tools for interpreting Pentecostalism as play and suggesting that it is indeed everyday literal activity which constitutes Pentecostal theology as play (Wariboko 2016), Wariboko speaks primarily to the operative principle and rarely to the mechanisms that enable the keying of Pentecostal activities. If play is operative not immediately as a fundamental principle, we must look first for a primary framework of everyday activities that allow Pentecostal theology to unfold as play.

Existing proposals relating play and Pentecostalism have consistently argued that play is evident in the distinctive assumptions, principles, and methods operative in the Pentecostal movement. However, the results have neither identified the primary framework of play active in Pentecostalism (what activities actually constitute play) nor attempted a keying of the central elements that make up this framework (how these activities can be understood as play). In the following pages, I therefore begin the necessary work of appraising Pentecostal theology by interpreting the actions, rules, movements, elements, and processes of Pentecostal theological activity a posteriori. Since my primary intention is methodological (rather than sociocultural, anthropological or ethnographic) analysis, the emphasis of the following proposal is on the keying of the different frames as a single theological type

(Pentecostal). At the same time, in order to distinguish this type from other dominant frameworks, the following interpretation also engages in an effort to show how Pentecostals participate in rekeying and reinterpreting existing theological identities. In this manner, the article aims at revealing both play as a universally accessible type and Pentecostalism as a particular expression of religion.

3. Religion as Play: A Primary Framework

Goffman's frame analysis suggests that an identification of Pentecostal theology depends on the activities of literal performances. Recognizing these performances as play depends on the keying of these activities and experiences and organizing them into a strip of activity that can account for Pentecostal theology as a whole. That the keying of primary frames reveals nonliteral activity (i.e., activity that is itself based on literal activity) allows us to highlight the conventions active in Pentecostalism that are otherwise hidden by the primary functions of those activities and to identify their transformed meaning for Pentecostals. In order to accentuate the particular character of this type, I will situate it amidst the two extreme ends of perceiving theology, on the one hand, as "mere" doctrine (as, for example, in contemporary philosophical and analytical theology) and, on the other, theology as "pure" experience (as, for example, in Christian mysticism as traditionally understood).³ Although Pentecostals show a frequent exaggerating, overlapping, and breaking of exact patterns of activity, I suggest that the following set of interpreted conventions identifies the foundational contours of Pentecostal religious behavior.

3.1. Frame 1: Pentecostal Spirituality or the Origin of Play

Pentecostal spirituality arises with Pentecost as the event where God's "Spirit poured out on all flesh" (Acts 2:17) touches the human spirit with a passion for the kingdom of God (See [Land 1993](#)). In light of the day of Pentecost, Pentecostal spirituality is not simply any form of exuberant experience or revival but the expression of a personal participation of the individual and the community in the biblical story of God actualized in Jesus Christ and made possible by the Holy Spirit ([Land 1993](#), pp. 71–82). Chief to Pentecostal spirituality is a core belief in Jesus as the center of the gospel filtered through a heavy emphasis on the cross and the resurrection (See [Studebaker 2012](#)). This Christocentric spirituality is clearly accentuated in Pentecostalism by the work of the Holy Spirit evident in the life of Christ and taken as the most essential component of living a Christ-like life ([Albrecht and Howard 2014](#)). The move to theological reflection is born from this emphasis on the Spirit of Christ, and the development of Pentecostal doctrine always passes through a personal encounter with Christ through the Holy Spirit. In this Christo-pneumatological sense, Pentecostal theological activity begins as spirituality. The character of Pentecostalism as play is rooted in the ordinary practices of this spirituality, or to put it theologically: play is an expression of the activity of the Holy Spirit who consummates and transforms ordinary practices and creates new communities of spiritual behavior. Of course, spirituality itself is not identical with play. Rather, Pentecostal spiritual practices mark only the starting point for the transformation of primordial patterns we identify as playful. The practices shaping Pentecostal spirituality tend to lead to a rather "thick description" (See [Yong 1997](#)) that needs to stay on the ground of experience even when reaching to the height of speculative abstraction: prayer, testimony, shouting, praise, and charismatic manifestations ranging from short or extended utterances to falling under the power of the Spirit form the repertoire of primary religious activities.

Pentecostal spirituality, as play of the Holy Spirit, makes theology as a purely intellectual or theoretical endeavor impossible. Theological expression among Pentecostals can be speculative and systematic albeit only if that means an integration of spirituality in terms of the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of the human being. The primary frames of Pentecostal theology emerge from, identify, preserve, and return to the foundational experience of the Holy Spirit. In this sense,

³ For proposals that Pentecostalism fits either type see ([Castelo 2017](#); [Stephenson 2014](#)).

Pentecostal theology is not strictly dogmatic; it does not seek articulation of doctrine as the primary task of doing theology (See [Vondey 2013, 2010](#), pp. 98–108). Instead, Pentecostalism (as play) seeks a relationship between spirituality and doctrine so that theology becomes a constant and reciprocal back and forth movement between beliefs, affections, and actions, on the one hand, and the articulation of doctrine, on the other (See [Stephenson 2014](#), pp. 114–19; [Chan 2000](#)). This movement should not be construed as a bias of overemphasizing spirituality or as an inability of Pentecostals to explain themselves (although both may be present); it is rather the result of not having learned consistently how to form a reciprocal bond between theology and spirituality—a problem inherited from modern Christian theology and accentuated by the unexpected experiences of the Holy Spirit. As a result, Pentecostal spirituality emerges as play, to use Huizinga’s terms, in an often abrupt, spontaneous and improvised fashion.

The centrality of spirituality has several immediate consequences for identifying Pentecostalism as a genuine theological type. First, the process of engaging faith through spirituality is always submitted to the experience of the Holy Spirit, or put differently, Pentecostal spirituality is always experiential. Second, the road of spirituality depends upon the articulation of the experience underlying the encounter with the Spirit, that is, Pentecostal spirituality always leads to narrative and testimony. Third, the relationship of Pentecostal experience and Pentecostal story is integrated by the affections, in other words, Pentecostal spirituality is fundamentally affective. Fourth, the affections are living expressions of Pentecostal spirituality that always lead to practices. And, fifth, Pentecostal practices are directly dependent on the rituals, rites, and liturgies of Pentecostal spirituality; in short, Pentecostal spirituality is always embodied. The current of Pentecostal spirituality moves from experience to testimony to affections to practices to embodiment and returns to experiences in an ongoing dynamic that captures what might be termed the development of doctrine in Pentecostalism (See [Chandler 2016](#)). Spirituality defines Pentecostalism as play not first and foremost by its outcome as a product of the encounter with God but as the potential for and expectation of the continuing experience of God in the world.

3.2. *Frame 2: The Experience of the Holy Spirit or the Playground of Pentecostalism*

The heartbeat of Pentecostal spirituality is the experience of the Holy Spirit, and religious activities derive from the actuality (not merely the possibility) of the experience of the Holy Spirit as an immediate revelation of God that seeks mediation in the life of the human person and the community ([Cartledge 2015](#)). On the level of contemplation, the Pentecostal imagination therefore begins with the Spirit and from there submits to the current of spirituality and theology. Oral narrative and testimony, proclamation, prayer, song and dance, prophecy, and speaking in tongues are some of the native expressions of the wonder of that experience.⁴ Scripture contains these ludic expressions in a normative but second-order fashion that allows Pentecostals to reflect on and discern their own experiences. Doctrine is in this process a third-order moment of an implicit theological method that emerges from and aims at the experience of worship rather than systematization, abstraction, and formalization.⁵ Pentecostals certainly participate in doctrinal discussion without always possessing a confessional experience, but any teaching not subjected to the primacy of the experience of the Holy Spirit cannot be attributed to Pentecostal origins. Put differently, Pentecostals can maintain any Christian doctrine without claiming that they are uniquely Pentecostal in origin or character. However, for such a teaching to be called “Pentecostal” it must pass through the inevitable and foundational moment of experience. In other words, authentic experience is the ground for Pentecostal spirituality to unfold as play.

⁴ For contrasting views see ([Ellington 2011](#); [Camery-Hogatt 2005](#)).

⁵ Even when the reading of Scripture leads to that experience, Pentecostals attribute primacy to the experience of the experience.

As playful action, what exactly Pentecostals mean by “experience” is (often intentionally) ambiguous—at least to the outside observer (Neumann 2012, pp. 100–61). In principle, for Pentecostals, experience refers the encounter with the Holy Spirit as recorded in the Scriptures and manifested on the day of Pentecost in charismatic signs and wonders (Neumann 2012, p. 7). The appeal to experience, Pentecostals have emphasized repeatedly, “demands more than *belief* in an experience—it demands the *experience of the experience* itself (Clark and Lederle 1989).” In other words, for the Pentecostal it is a particular kind of experience—not the idea of experience as such—that forms the foundational moment for the emergence as a religious movement. More precisely, it is the particular set of experiences surrounding the immediate encounter with the Holy Spirit that forms the foundation for Pentecostal spirituality to continue theologically: conversion, sanctification, Spirit baptism, divine healing, and a sense of commissioning are among the primary experiences. Pentecostals can use the notion of experience, in full awareness of its ambiguity, broadly as representing an epistemological appeal to a transformative encounter with the immanence of God mediated by the Holy Spirit through the whole spectrum of created existence. Nonetheless, Pentecostals shy away from this kind of conceptualization in fear of losing the playful dynamism of the actual experience and of turning the encounter with God into a mere object of theological reflection distanced from a personal and communal transformation (Chan 2000, p. 24). The continuation of spirituality as play remains tied to the biographies and ethnographies that testify to the concrete contexts of the Pentecostal life: theological generalizations and formulations of doctrine are shaped and reshaped by personal experiences, practices, and rituals in the religious life of the churches (See Marina 2013; Versteeg 2011; Cartledge 2010; Poloma and Hood 2008). A single and isolated experience may not exhibit the character of play. However, from the shared experiences of the transformed community emerges a central theological narrative for articulating the Pentecostal imagination, even if the underlying experiences are not bound strictly to this narrative.

3.3. Frame 3: The Pentecostal Full Gospel or the Narrative of the Pentecostal Imagination

Narrative is widely considered the native expression of Pentecostal spirituality.⁶ The most widely-known framework for narrating the set of Pentecostal experiences is the so-called full gospel, which emerged historically as a four- or five-fold pattern.⁷ The larger, five-fold pattern proclaims, usually in kerygmatic form, the good news that Jesus Christ brings (1) salvation, (2) sanctification, (3) baptism in the Spirit, (4) divine healing, and (5) the coming kingdom of God (See Dayton 1987). These elements identify the themes of a theological narrative cast in the image of the biblical story of Pentecost. Rather than representing elements of propositional doctrine or a system of doctrines, identifying the full gospel as a narrative for articulating meaningful experiences and spirituality suggests that these theological accents build the core motivation for Pentecostal self-presentation but not the exclusive rules or structures for articulating Pentecostal doctrine (See Cartledge 2008b; Thomas 1998; Land 1993, p. 183; Dayton 1987, pp. 21–23). Narrating the full gospel in testimony and story is a primary frame insofar as it functions as a narrative to the unsolicited encounter with the Holy Spirit (Richie 2011; Ellington 2001; Kroll-Smith 1980). The goal of the full gospel is to tell the story of the Pentecostal experiences of the Spirit and to preserve the availability and validity of those experiences and their perpetuation as a model. In other words, the full gospel is not a performative structure for explicating Pentecostal doctrine; its playful character lies not in the narrative itself but in the activity of narrating; the testimony to the experience of the encounter with God defines the Pentecostal identity. Play unfolds “before” and “while” the theological narrative is articulated, from within the experiences that shape Pentecostal spirituality, and with disinterest in exclusively functional or regulatory concerns of doctrine.

⁶ The notion of the Pentecostal story was developed by Archer (2010b, 2009, 2004).

⁷ Preceding the Pentecostal narrative is Simpson (1890); repr. 1925.

The narrating of the full gospel varies historically and geographically, since the pattern is not the result of systematic theological reflection but a descriptive mechanism of Pentecostal spirituality shaped by a range of personal and communal experiences. Some Pentecostals may not readily use the phrase “full gospel” or its relatives to identify their theology even though the elements of the narrative are clearly seen. Pentecostal groups employ the elements of the full gospel “in a creative and not always in a constant way” (Kärkkäinen 2007). At times, the patterns emerge only individually and not as a whole. The full gospel should therefore not be understood as a definitive formula for the content of Pentecostal doctrine (See Archer 2010a). Literal Pentecostal testimony unfolds as an activity not bound to a strict order, rules, or regulations.

As playful action, testimony is shaped by a correspondence between the freedom of experiences and practices, on the one hand, and the demands of theological reflection and doctrinal articulation, on the other. Therein lies the greatest challenge of actualizing the Pentecostal imagination as play in activities carried out amidst the tension between an idealized “pure” experience and its counterpart as the strict dogmatic adherence to doctrine. Pentecostal testimony is not merely making explicit what is implicit in Pentecostal spirituality and worship, but the encounter with the Spirit acts as a unique hermeneutic in its own right (Cf. Oliverio 2014). Hence, the experiences narrated by the full gospel cannot simply be dissolved into other sources of theology or other religious activities (Vondey 2010, pp. 78–108). Telling the full gospel therefore represents a kind of instrument of play that allows Pentecostal spirituality to proceed from experience to the articulation of doctrine. Yet, the focus is not on the narrative itself, as on a set of rules for play, but on the act of narrating as a form of reliving and communicating the original experiences. The carrier of this form of participatory communication are the affections.

3.4. *Frame 4: Pentecostal Affections or the Energy of Religion as Play*

The Pentecostal imagination, identified by the spirituality of an immediate experience of God that seeks mediation, does not and cannot proceed directly as intellectual knowledge: rules transform play into a game, its competitive and performative counterpart. Instead, Pentecostal theology proceeds as play along a different dynamic of maintaining and interpreting the foundational experiences. The testimony of the full gospel is a consequence of the demands of a variety of such interpreted experiences (See Thomas 2010). Communicating the narrative of these experiences theologically proceeds not directly through doctrine or narrative but through the affections associated with the original encounter (Smith 2010). Affections mediate God’s involvement in the world through manifested expressions of the passion of God’s being revealed in Jesus Christ and communicated by the Holy Spirit (Cf. Solivan 1998). Passion is the bridge between Pentecostal experience and doctrine, since the encounter with God occurs in the human being in a manner reflecting God’s eternal being and thus characterizing the human person in its disposition toward God’s passion for the world (Land 1993, pp. 131–64). The jubilant manifestations of the affections, including love, gratitude, compassion, courage, and joy, often raw and unexpected, but also in their learned and reflective use, provide the energy for the Pentecostal imagination to unfold as play.

The manifestation of the experiences of God proceed primarily by way of the affections rather than intellect, reason, and knowledge, and often bring Pentecostal theology (along with its spirituality, experience, and narrative) to the limits of speech, concepts, theory, and systematization (Smith 2010, pp. 123–50). Reflection on the affections proceeds by way of an imagination nurtured by the actual encounter with the Holy Spirit that seeks to interpret all reality in terms of the worldview generated by that experience (Yong 2005, pp. 27–30; 2002, pp. 110–217). Image, symbol, song, poetry, prophecy, vision, dreams, and glossolalia are the media of religious play carried by the affections (Vondey 2010, pp. 26–46; Yong 2005, p. 28). The goal of this articulation is worship—Pentecostal theology as affective theology emerges from spirituality as worship and with the intention to return to worship. The importance of the affections shows that the ordinary practices of play are theological because they are fundamentally doxological. Consequently, limiting the theological articulation of the Pentecostal

experience to particular affections would also limit the scope of Pentecostal doxology to only particular forms or patterns of play or dissolve the activity immediately into doctrine. Although the concern of Pentecostal spirituality is clearly for the sanctified passions, the spectrum of the affections cannot be defined by dogmatic systems but depends on the direction given by the affections on individuals and in corporate discernment (Land 1993, p. 135). Pentecostal theology is not concentrated in a single passion but dispersed among a variety of affections along a core commitment to the experience of God, understood as the transforming and renewing encounter with Christ through the Holy Spirit (Coulter 2016). Unfolding as play, the affective proclamation of the full gospel emphasizes the importance of any experience of the Spirit as one moment towards the potential “fullness” of the redemptive and transformative work of God. Pentecostal theology is in this sense an affective embodiment of the universal promise of Pentecost that the outpouring of the Spirit transcends all theological structures, norms, and prejudices. Pentecostalism can therefore not be governed either by the authority of revelation or dogmatic systems and theological narratives alone but proceeds always as unpredictable expression of an imaginative praxis oriented toward the full realization of the encounter with God.

3.5. Frame 5: Pentecostal Praxis or the Manifestation of Religion as Play

The activities of spirituality, experience, narrative, and affections characterize Pentecostal theology inherently as praxis. With praxis, I refer to the activities which engage in the analyzing, exercising, realizing, and applying of ideas, on the one hand, and which lead to the production of knowledge and contemplation, on the other (See Arendt 1998). This emphasis should not be misunderstood, as if Pentecostals rejected, ignored, or neglected rational, theoretical, or speculative theology. Instead, the insistence on practicing theology is a particular orientation toward the task of theology and, as such, a pattern of doing theology (See Volf and Bass 2002). The main significance of this primary frame is that theology cannot exist as play without being practiced. In its focus on praxis, Pentecostal spirituality, experience, narrative, and affections turn from the private and individual realm to the public, social, political, and productive life.⁸ In other words, it is with the transition to theological practices that Pentecostalism emerges most clearly as a genuine theological type.

Identifying Pentecostalism as the praxis of play is challenged by the potentially unlimited modes of expression of the experience of the Spirit made possible by an affective spirituality. The chief consequence of this challenge is that Pentecostal spirituality cannot proceed immediately in the forms and customs of traditional Christian theology, when conceived as doctrine, creeds, propositions, or wisdom. The affective dimension contrasts with the often performative, functionalistic, rationalistic, utilitarian, and competitive character of these perspectives (Vondey 2010, pp. 13–15; Suurmond 1992, pp. 250–52). Simply put, the actualization of theological practices is not the same across the religious landscape. The practical dimension in theology as play expresses the experience of the Holy Spirit at the root of Pentecostal spirituality and demands the continuous association of Pentecostal doctrine with the original experience (Stephenson 2006). Identifying the play in Pentecostalism is affected by the insight that theology *cannot* proceed without being practiced but *can* proceed without being articulated as doctrine.

Although praxis alone is not the fullness of play, it is clear that play (and hence Pentecostalism and its practices) does not easily fit the mold of established theological traditions and Christian religious identity. The long-term challenge of play is that playing does not want to become conscious of itself as play. Pentecostal praxis cannot be “performed” in purely prescriptive and instrumentalized ways without dismantling the affections by threatening to objectify the experience of God underlying them and dispersing the human response to the passion of God into fragments of dogmatic propositions.⁹ As play, this kind of theology wants to remain within the realm of experience and practices, or at least

⁸ See, for example, (Haynes 2017; Brown 2011; Yong 2010; Miller and Yamamori 2007).

⁹ This is the question of Stephenson (2014, pp. 246–64); (Archer 2007; Cross 2000).

return to them. Pentecostal theology does not want to be understood; it wants to be practiced and lived (as a form of understanding, yet sometimes in pre-cognitive or irrational ways). Pentecostalism exists more in the realm of possibilities and wonder than in the realm of already actualized and objectified projections of reality. Amidst this tension, play is worship, the joy of God's grace, the exuberance of life, the freedom of creation finding itself lost in God See (Ingalls and Yong 2015). Play collapses when this tension is resolved prematurely, either by an overrealized confidence in doctrine or an escapist appeal to a pure experience of God (Land 1993, p. 15). Although both are possible in Pentecostalism, neither defines the methodology of the movement. Both extremes are, so to speak, embedded and implicit in the unlimited potentiality of Pentecostal spirituality, experiences, narrative, and affections. Play does not eschew the extremes—it requires them in order to remain in the realm of possibilities. Hence, Pentecostal theology cannot be an end in itself, for that would resolve the play (Wariboko 2012, pp. 63–64). Instead, Pentecostal praxis is a form of overaccepting at all cost the superfluous potential of wonder. For this potential to be actualized in play, literal practices rely on the constant demand for embodiment: jumping, dancing, shouting, prophesying, speaking in tongues, anointing, laying on of hands, praying and potentially all practices of the Christian life. Embodiment is the most outward expression of Pentecostal spirituality and therefore the most readily observable manifestation of religion as play.

3.6. Frame 6: Pentecostal Embodiment or the Traditioning of the Pentecostal Imagination

Embodiment refers to the materiality and physicality of practices that form and are informed by Pentecostal spirituality, experiences, narrative, and affections. Not all theological praxis is embodied, yet the embodiment of dominant practices allows for the most immediate observation of its primary frames. Embodiment is the physical and material expression of meaning-making through the human body that embraces the habitual and ritual forms of the communal body.¹⁰ Undoubtedly, the worship service forms the wellspring of embodied practices among Pentecostals. Rituals, rites and liturgy, once foreign terms to many Pentecostals, have become increasingly the focus of theological attention (Cartledge and Swoboda 2016; Lindhardt 2011; Albrecht 1999; Alexander 1991). Among these practices, the altar call and response stand out as the climax of traditional Pentecostal worship (Vondey 2016; Tomberlin 2010). Contemporary ritual, historical and phenomenological studies of worldwide Pentecostalism affirm certain foundational rites oriented around the altar as the consistent practices and traditions of the Pentecostal movement (Cartledge 2010; Vondey 2012; Miller and Yamamori 2007, pp. 129–59; Arweck and Keenan 2006). Although theology cannot be defined absolutely by any particular ritual, doxological practices are closest to the ground of Pentecostal origins and the way Pentecostalism is embodied across the world. The summit and source of Pentecostal worship, rituals, and practices, from which Pentecostalism can be grasped in its embodied form, is undoubtedly the altar service, and other practices (and their doctrinal reflections) are readily integrated in a central ritual of the altar call and response (Vondey 2016, pp. 99–106). We might say that Pentecostal theology functions on the basis of an “altar hermeneutics”¹¹ which expresses Pentecostal spirituality, experience, narrative, and affections in palpable practices and experiences. Play unfolds at the altar in several native, adopted, and enculturated rites that also show the challenges of embodiment.

On the one hand, the playfulness of the altar resists “ritual” as a strict ecclesiastical performance of a liturgical script within a fixed semiotic system of sacerdotal or sacramental regulations (Alexander 1997, 1989). Instead, Pentecostal rituals are playful because they are often improvised and unstructured (Vondey 2010, pp. 109–40). Since the most widely accepted Pentecostal doctrines have emerged from Pentecostal practices at the altar, Pentecostals are most prepared to engage other doctrines as doxology and liturgy. In turn, conceptualized doctrines and philosophical considerations have to be brought

¹⁰ See the essays in Wilkinson and Althouse (2017).

¹¹ For this term see (Moore 2016).

into play in the embodied world of the rituals, sacraments, and practices surrounding the altar. From this embodied environment of worship, Pentecostal theology can expand into a constructive and systematic framework for the traditioning of the Pentecostal type. On the other hand, Pentecostals have also struggled with the question of whether their embodied theology can (or should) be ordered doctrinally and systematically (Archer 2007; Cross 2000; Yong 1998; Bundy 1993). Part of the difficulty is concentrated in the need for a rational and coherent method that would allow for the transposition of Pentecostal liturgy into formulations of doctrine without threatening the integrity of its theology (Vondey 2001). Another concern is that systematic theology is dominated by western ideas and constructs that are not always readily shared by the Pentecostal experiences in the East and the global South (See Anderson 2013a, 2013b). If we identify Pentecostalism with the embodied spirituality, experiences, stories, affections, and practices of play, then a systematic account of Pentecostal theology may threaten to institutionalize, theorize, disimpassion or disembodiment the demand for the immediacy of the human encounter with God. Embodiment holds Pentecostal theology accountable to engaging the world not exclusively through doctrine but also materially, physically, spiritually, aesthetically, morally and socially (Cf. Volf 1989). At the intersection of individual and public embodiment, Pentecostal liturgy is often the loudest and most expressive manifestation of play.

The continuing challenge of identifying Pentecostal theology as play is a reduction of its core elements to one such frame at the cost of neglecting the entire strip of activity. What is lost in any reductionism is the dynamic of experience, reflection, practice and transformation at the core of each element and of Pentecostal theology as a whole. What is tempting is to label Pentecostal theology not as seeking embodiment (and thus a hospitable invitation to participate) but as already fully embodied (and thus requiring no further transformation).¹² At stake is the temptation to let Pentecostal theology merely perform in front of us so as to observe its various qualities as an object of scrutiny. Reduced to a bystander and observer, we may overlook that the underlying intention of Pentecostal theology is not merely to dis-play itself as an expressively embodied form of Christianity but to invite others to participate in the play. The embodied life of Pentecostals is not the end of Pentecostal theology; it is a necessary climax in its manifestation of the encounter with God's Spirit. Yet, Pentecostalism unfolds as play only along the entirety of its theological activities. Participation in the embodied habits and rituals draws theology back into the spirituality, experiences, narratives, affections, and practices that together form the primary framework of this religious expression of play.

4. Pentecostalism as a Religious Model

The preceding analysis of the primary framework operative in Pentecostalism yields a strip of literal activities that together comprise the heartbeat of the Pentecostal imagination. The frame analysis attempted here on the most general level reveals a sequence of behaviours involving an overlapping pattern of spirituality, experience, narrative, affections, practices, and embodiment rather than a central doctrine or a constructive system or organizing theological principle. At the same time, it would be misleading to label this pattern as simply an example of "ordinary" or "everyday" religious behaviour in contrast to "organized" religion or "systematic" theology. The challenge of this literal framework is precisely its insistence on abandoning the preference for constructive and analytical theology over self-identifying everyday activities. The importance of identifying the primary frames of Pentecostalism is both the making visible of the elementary activities that would otherwise be seen as insignificant and the interpretation of these literal performances as a coherent model for a (young) religious movement. It is therefore important to assert that Pentecostal theology is found primarily in the literal activities of Pentecostal spirituality, experience, narrative, affections, practices, and embodiment, and that any theological conversation about the identity of Pentecostalism

¹² The trend to speak of Pentecostalism in broader terms as "renewal Christianity" expresses the continuing transformation of the movement from its historical origins at the beginning of the twentieth century.

as a religious movement outside of this framework is secondary. The admittedly rather general identification of many of these activities in this essay reflects the difficulties Pentecostals (and those observing Pentecostalism) have had with precise theological definitions—a problem typical for any young religious movement. The immediate way forward therefore must be a closer occupation with these elemental frames if we wish to understand more deeply the religious nature of Pentecostalism. Nonetheless, this task must also remember that these literal performances are not an end in themselves; they are the building blocks of what has been labelled here as play. It is precisely because there is no single activity we can label literally as “play” that the theological task ahead requires the interpretation of all literal performances to identify their genuine theological and religious identity.

Play is an appropriate model for Pentecostal theology because it holds the literal activities of the religious movement in tension, not in a strict order or within a tight structure, but with a light hand, following few patterns, regularly starting, stopping and overlapping activities, allowing each element to call forth the others yet without a firm template. When these elements are performed subject to a system of thought, a ruling principle or a determinative meaning, rather than played and improvised, they often exhibit a forced framework in which we can still find all the activities of the expected religious identity. Yet, the mere performance of these activities is not the core of Pentecostalism; its religious identity is not defined by the literal activities as such: any religion can (and does) employ spirituality, experience, narrative, affections, practices, and embodiment. Rather, the mode or imagination by which these activities are held together is found only in Pentecostalism. Play can be used to organize Pentecostal theology without the risk of copying the patterns and convictions of other religious or theological traditions, a frequent choice that has immobilized Pentecostal theology (Cf. [Dabney 2001](#)). When adopted as a model for Pentecostal theology, play alerts us to the large realm of still unscripted behaviours at the root of everyday Pentecostalism worldwide and to the importance of keying these activities as a particular religious identity. When adopted as a model for religious identity, in general, play directs the attention of method and theory in religious studies to the primary framework of literal activities and the religious imagination holding them together. Pentecostalism can be seen as a model for exhibiting religion as play and therefore as offering an important (and still largely unexplored) contribution to the understanding of religion.

Religion as play exists in Pentecostalism, as it were, through and beyond the performance of each literal act. Whereas many established theological traditions are rather uncomfortable with such unpredictable flexibility and indeterminate freedom, it is precisely this playfulness which can help characterize Pentecostalism going forward. The strip of activities described here as Pentecostalism’s primary framework cannot be generalized; they are characteristic only of the kind of play we find among Pentecostals. However, this conclusion still allows for the possibility that different primary activities can characterize different forms of play (and thus different religious traditions). The question arises also as to whether play represents a permanent religious identity or is perhaps part of the character of any young religious movement, such as Pentecostalism. Yet, Pentecostals are on their way to socializing, routinizing, and institutionalizing their religious identity ([Poloma 1989](#); [Roelofs 1994](#)). If these developments affect the Pentecostal imagination, they will most certainly have a dramatic impact on the primary activities detailed in this study.

5. Conclusions

The chief conclusion of this article is that play constitutes a generic type of religious activity of which Pentecostalism is a consistent but special manifestation. This insight implies that, at least in principle, play is not exclusive to Pentecostal theology, but that Pentecostals manifest a particularly visible form of religion that we can designate as play. What is possible with the notion of play is not only a critical comparison of Pentecostalism with other types of religion, but the elevation of religious discourse to the level of a principal taxonomic category. Consequently, the designation of religion with such a broad phenomenon as play draws not merely from theological motivations but also embraces the concerns of anthropology, culture, psychology, sociology, history, pedagogy, and

scientific methodology. That Pentecostalism exhibits this theological type with particular force may provide insight into the reasons for the exceptional growth and persistence of Pentecostalism as a movement worldwide. The transformational power of play is seen in the way Pentecostals both evoke and break out of the primary frames, and this resistance may indicate that play, although a generic type, is not normative for Christian theology or religion as a whole. Further study of the method and theory of play in religion must therefore depend on individual frame analysis as well as on the mode of play visible in the fullness of theological activities worldwide.

Pentecostalism represents an important opportunity for the endeavour to understand play as a genuine religious identity. However, a type does not readily function also as a model, and the results of this study cannot simply be reversed as if to turn play into a sequence of primary but disconnected activities subject to imitation and repetition. Religion as play cannot be fabricated by following the pattern of spirituality, experience, narrative, affections, practices, and embodiment. Pentecostalism as a theological type labelled play is highly participatory and dependent on the unending potentiality to transcend (and to conceal) its ordinary activities towards the expanded possibilities that all who participate are “lost” in play aimed at the encounter with the transforming presence of God. In this goal, we find perhaps the core motivation for Pentecostalism and thus the key for understanding religion as play. Nonetheless, if play is an element of any young religious movement, then a “mature” religion may indeed exhibit a very different character from its playful origins, which could explain the differences observed already in diverse geographical locations, sociocultural contexts, and historical stages of Pentecostalism. Religion at play may then be found only as a temporal phenomenon in the history of religion. If, on the other hand, Pentecostals are able to maintain their playful imagination, then we may have found in Pentecostalism a genuine type of religious identity which deserves further attention.

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